

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL SECTION

POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN AZERBAIJAN – THE JANUARY 2013 PROTESTS AND BEYOND

SOFIE BEDFORD

UPPSALA UNIVERSITY

A wave of public protests rocked Azerbaijan at the beginning of 2013. The first protest event of the year was inspired by the disputed death of a young conscript in the Azerbaijani army. While the official cause of death was heart attack, the family insisted he was beaten to death. The result was a fierce debate about the difficulties facing newly recruited soldiers and the conditions under which they serve. Some activists initiated a Facebook group and called for a demonstration in Baku on January 12. Twenty thousand people joined the group, an impressive number by Azerbaijani standards, given that support for anti-establishment manifestations can be dangerous. Later as many as 1,000 protesters, also a large number for Azerbaijan, joined the actual event in support of the dead soldiers' family, demanding the defense minister's resignation. Just a week later shopkeepers at Baku's largest shopping mall, Bina, protested against increased rents. The demonstrators blocked a major highway and 5,000 shopkeepers kept their businesses closed in support of the protest. This was shortly followed by another spontaneous outbreak of dissent in Ismayili, 150 km northwest of Baku, where community members set fire to cars and buildings and called for the governor's resignation after a controversial car accident. Riot police finally managed to disperse the protesters, many of whom were injured and/or imprisoned. The harsh treatment brought about another rally in the capital in support of the Ismayili protesters. The outbreak of civic unrest in Ismayili can be seen as particularly important since it indicates discontent with the government, not only in Baku, but outside the capital as well.¹

The January events were followed by others, very diverse in

Sofie Bedford is post-doctoral fellow at Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Box 514, 751 20 Uppsala, Sweden, e-mail: sofie.bedford@ucrs.uu.se

¹ Andrea Briedé. 2013. "Azerbaijan: is the opposition gaining ground?," *Risk Advisory* 26 April; Aleksandra Jarosiewicz. 2013. "Protests in Azerbaijan: Hot Months Expected Ahead of the Presidential Election," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* No. 46.

character; both in Baku and outside; some within the framework of “democracy activism” and others mainly addressing economic issues, such as low wages. Their common denominator appears to have been frustration with a leadership that, despite paying lip service to reforms, let corruption, nepotism and autocracy rule. Hence, some analysts and activists described these events as the beginning of an “Azerbaijani Spring.” However, while the authorities appear to initially have been taken by surprise, they learned their lesson and all subsequent unsanctioned demonstrations were stifled with force, with the law enforcement agencies often taking advantage of new methods and equipment. Nevertheless, the protests are intriguing as they illustrate the increased will, of at least certain groups, to actively participate in shaping the societal and political arena in a country most often described in terms of political apathy. The articles in this issue focus on the new dynamics of political opposition in Azerbaijan by analyzing the actors (Sultanova), the role of social media (Pearce) and the innovative use of humor (Hadjizade and Pearce) to carry out dissent. This introduction will serve as a background to these texts by elaborating on the circumstances that have molded this new wave of activism.²

Political Apathy and the Opposition’s Endemic Problems

To a large extent the recent mobilization in Azerbaijan can be accredited to a generational shift in the democratic opposition movement. In 1992 Abulfaz Elchibey, leader of the Azerbaijan People’s Front Party was elected president of independent Azerbaijan, in what has been called the only free and fair election in the country’s history.³ His government lasted less than a year and ever since Azerbaijan has been under the presidency of the Aliyev family. The Popular Front Party instead became the backbone of the political opposition and most current opposition parties stem from the Popular Front, as do a majority of the current opposition leaders (see Sultanova, this issue). During these 20 years, since the fall of the Elchibey government, the efforts of the opposition have faced continuous official constraints and growing national and international discredit. Their work is suffering from the lack of opportunity to actively participate in the political decision-making process. Government restrictions hinder their day-to-day activities as well as electoral campaigning.⁴ Without access

² The articles in this Special Issue are an outcome of the international research symposium *#ProtestBaku. Is Azerbaijan next in line for a Democratic Revolution?* organized by the Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies (UCRS), Uppsala University on May 21, 2013, thanks to the generous financial support of the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation.

³ Anar M. Valiyev 2006. “Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan: A Failed Revolution,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 53:3, 17-35.

⁴ Ayça Ergun. 2010. Post-Soviet Political Transformation in Azerbaijan: Political Elite, Civil Society and the Trials of Democratization, *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 7:26, 67-85; Leila Aliyeva.

to the public through media or political channels, no opposition movement is able to unify and efficiently organize itself to play a political role. Opposition groups simply cannot assess their audience to set an achievable purpose. They are condemned to agitate in almost empty spaces, thereby disempowering themselves. Still, many analysts believe the problems of the opposition go beyond the political system's structural limitations. They have been described as disorganized, fractured, disillusioned, weak and too concentrated in urban areas. Moreover, they are seen as more focused on the promotion of political leaders than specific ideologies, which has resulted in a lack of platforms that could attract voters. The inability to unite was a fatal flaw in the 2003 presidential election, where they could not present a unified candidate to challenge Ilham Aliyev.⁵ The final nail in the coffin was the failed "color revolution" following the 2005 parliamentary elections.⁶

After the electoral revolutions in some other post-Soviet countries, many thought Azerbaijan was the next authoritarian country in line for regime change. There were great hopes ahead of the 2005 parliamentary elections as the political opposition united and organized major demonstrations against the lack of democracy and freedom. This effort fell flat when the opposition lost the election and the protests against the election results were suppressed quickly and brutally. Many analysts saw the failed revolution as symptomatic for an incapable, disorganized political opposition.⁷ The history of fraud, as well as the opposition parties' lack of visible achievement, has reinforced the widespread political apathy among the population, which is often referred to as a major hindrance to Azerbaijan's road to democratization.⁸ As noted by Valiyev, "few Azerbaijani voters actually participate in electoral politics, because most do not believe that voting can change anything."⁹

One main problem appears to be that the opposition parties have not been able to renew themselves, either in terms of members or activities. Although young people eligible to vote are twenty five percent of

2006. "Azerbaijan's Frustrating Elections," *Journal of Democracy* 17:2, 147-160.

⁵ Rahman Badalov and Niyazi Mehdi. 2005. "The political institutions of Azerbaijan: a dichotomy between text and reality." In Armineh Arakelian and Ghia Nodia, eds, *Constitutional/political reform process in Georgia, in Armenia and Azerbaijan: political elite and voices of the people*. Tbilisi: International IDEA and CIPDD.

⁶ Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik. 2010. "Defeating Dictators: Electoral Change and Stability in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes," *World Politics* 62:1, 43-86; Vicken Cheterian. 2010. "Azerbaijan." In Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese, eds, *The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics*. Routledge, 101-117.

⁷ Svante. E. Cornell. 2011. *Azerbaijan Since Independence*. New York: M.E. Sharpe

⁸ Rajab Sattarov, Tair Faradov and Ilham Mamed-zade. 2007. "Civil Society in Azerbaijan. Challenges and Opportunities in Transition," Baku: CIVICUS Civil Society Index Report in Azerbaijan.

⁹ Valiyev, "Parliamentary Elections"...

the population, they have the fewest representatives of their peer group in politics. Traditionally opposition parties have a youth-wing, nevertheless they do not include the younger generation in their core structure.¹⁰ In light of this situation, it is interesting to note that a new generation of activists has manifested itself in the civil society sphere during the last five years. This phenomenon has been explained by some as the result of “young, Internet-savvy, and Western-educated” Azerbaijanis, who have been studying abroad, returning home.¹¹ Some are affiliated to pro-democracy youth movements (see Sultanova, this issue), others are individuals without formal organization, but who can, according to Pearce, be seen as part of a connective action network opposing the government using mainly the Internet (see Pearce, this issue). Gradually these activists have become the most vocal opposition in the country. In the lead-up to the 2013 presidential election some of these young activists were voicing criticism of the tactics and perspectives of the “old guard” opposition¹² and they were also, not surprisingly, the organizers of the demonstration on January 12, which was the largest Azerbaijan had seen in quite some time.

Stability versus Democracy

Another key to understanding the rise of civic mobilization in Azerbaijan is the authorities’ and activists’ very incompatible perceptions of democracy and its role in post-Soviet Azerbaijani society. While the state promotes a “controlled democracy” to ensure stability, the new members of the opposition are pushing harder and harder for real democratic reforms, freedoms and change.

The end of the Soviet era and the beginning of independence were very turbulent and rough for the people of Azerbaijan. Ethnic tensions between Azerbaijanis and Armenians led Soviet troops to enter Baku, leaving many traumatized, and to the outbreak of war over Nagorno-Karabakh, in which Azerbaijan lost a large part of its territory. The political scene was characterized by chaos as well. The Popular Front Party’s brief term in power was characterized by infighting, coups and political violence. It was in this context that former politburo member Heydar Aliyev, previously head of both Azerbaijan’s KGB and Communist Party, was called back onto the political scene. Heydar became the “savior,” he negotiated the seizure of power, got rid of the trouble makers in politics,

¹⁰ Nadia Diuk. 2012. *The Next Generation in Russia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan: Youth, Politics, Identity, and Change*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

¹¹ Aytan Gahramanova. 2009. “Internal and External Factors in the Democratization of Azerbaijan,” *Democratization* 16:4, 777-803.

¹² Shahla Sultanova. 2012. Do Azerbaijan’s Opposition Leaders face a Mid-life Crisis, *Eurasianet* September 17, at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65922>, accessed August 19, 2013.

and established good relations with neighboring countries.¹³ In short, he is seen to have brought the stability that the country so badly needed. The turbulent years are still alive in the memory of many of the Azerbaijanis who never want to go through such an experience again. The need for stability has translated into the cornerstone of government policy. Stability is the key to both national and international success and must be protected at any cost. In government rhetoric it is often indicated that “some countries” would like to see a destabilized Azerbaijan. Most often this is heard in terms of the “threat from imported radicalism,” but lately it has also been applied to those who question democratic progress in Azerbaijan. In connection to the January protests, the head of the Azerbaijani Presidential Administration’s Social and Political Department Ali Hasanov said he believes some countries want

...the situation of 1991-1993 to return to Azerbaijan, when rallies were held, roads were blocked, and shops were robbed...They want this kind of society. Why do they say that the democracy in Azerbaijan doesn’t suit them? Because we demand responsible democracy. We say that there must be a balance of human rights. The rights of one person begin where the rights of other individuals end. The balance is a resource of governance in the hands of the authorities.¹⁴

This quote illustrates the clash between a perceived need for stability and many activists’ wish to publically promote democratic change. Anyone promoting a “counter-frame” is perceived as disturbing stability and labeled “oppositional,” which can have dangerous consequences. In this respect, the need for absolute stability is counteracting mainstream notions of freedom and democracy. According to its constitution, Azerbaijan is a democratic country. In the words of the president, “all freedoms are protected in Azerbaijan. The freedom of speech and freedom of the press are fully provided. There is free internet in Azerbaijan. The freedom of assembly is fully guaranteed.”¹⁵ In reality, the perception that all freedoms need to be controlled, in order not to destabilize the country, creates a democracy substantially different from what, for example, people

¹³ Adam Hug. 2012. “Introduction: Spotlight on Azerbaijan”. In: Adam Hug, ed, *Spotlight on Azerbaijan*. London: The Foreign Policy Centre.

¹⁴ E. Mehdiyev. 2013. Baku names reasons of some countries pressure on Azerbaijan, *Trend*, May 24, at <http://en.trend.az/news/politics/2154284.html>, accessed August 20, 2013.

¹⁵ Ilham Aliyev. 2013. *Speech by Ilham Aliyev official reception on the occasion of the national holiday of Azerbaijan - the Republic Day 27.05.2013*. Baku, at <http://en.president.az/articles/8312>, accessed August 20, 2013.

in Western Europe are used to.

For quite some time, it did seem that among the Azerbaijani population at large the wish for stability was stronger than the wish to dispute this notion of democracy. However, as noted above, a growing number of voices are heard, mainly among the younger generations, questioning the democratic progress and disputing the way democracy is practiced in Azerbaijan. For many of these people, the short-lived independent Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (1918–1920) has become the symbol for how things could be different.¹⁶ One example can be found in the *Manifesto for Change* by Emin Milli, a youth activist who has become one of the most well-known representatives of the growing democracy movement. *Manifesto for Change* was first presented at the MAKE A DIFFERENCE Forum in the House of Lords and later appeared on Facebook and other social media sites.

I believe that it is time to make fundamental changes and to re-write “the script” of our future. We need a new “script” for our FUTURE deeply rooted in our Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (ADR) heritage and its spirit. The leaders of the ADR, the leaders of the first recognized democratic republic in the Muslim world, started our long way to freedom from the belief in the power of ideas, in the power of dreams and in the power of education.¹⁷

The shared goal for many of the new youth movements is spreading ideas of democracy and civic activism among the youth in order to build a better society. By labeling groups and individuals that are questioning the hegemonic perception of democracy “oppositional,” the state has forced the perception of a “we and they” and strengthened, rather than discouraged, the feeling among certain groups and individuals that change is needed. As the authorities use every means available to try to control discursive practices, the conflict between change and stability translates into social reality.

Repression and Mobilization

In Azerbaijan the political situation has deteriorated under the rule of Ilham Aliyev. Using the claim of the need for stability, the country has, according to the International Crisis Group, gone from a semi-authoritarian state to

¹⁶ Diuk.

¹⁷ Emin Milli. 2008. *Manifesto for Change in Azerbaijan*, at <http://ol-az.blogspot.se/2008/11/manifesto-for-change-in-azerbaijan.html>, accessed August 20, 2013.

a fully authoritarian one.¹⁸ With every election, power has become more concentrated in the hands of the president and his New Azerbaijan party. While earlier the traditional opposition parties were always given at least symbolic representation, after the 2010 parliamentary elections, they no longer have seats in the legislature.¹⁹ The opportunities for political opposition to publically express their views have also been decreasing. Getting a permit to organize a rally in a central location is near impossible and at the end of 2012, the government adopted a new law which dramatically increased the fines for organizing and participating in so-called unauthorized rallies.²⁰ Besides the financial punishments, the harsh handling of protesters during the 2013 events has shown the authorities will not accept any gathering that in their view could threaten the political status quo. The developments surrounding the March 10, 2013, protest are a vivid illustration of this. On this day a renewed protest in support of mistreated soldiers was planned. There was great anticipation among democracy activists, with intense online mobilization on social media. Nevertheless, the outcome was a disappointment. The police arrested many activists before the protests and did their best to physically prevent demonstrators from getting to Fountain Square in Baku, where the protest was to take place. Public transport was halted in some areas and large parts of the city center blocked to restrict access to the square. Those who managed to arrive there faced stiff resistance from riot police using brand new water cannons, rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse the demonstrators. There were also a number of “sound cannons” (Long Range Acoustic Devices - LRAD) placed at strategic locations ready to be used; such equipment, however, did not become necessary as the police managed to empty the square in less than an hour. The demonstrators who did not go voluntarily were dragged away and several received injuries through their brutal handling. Any attempt to resume the protest on the side streets and the boardwalk was stopped. Many of those who took part in the protest were arrested or put on buses out of the city. So far, participants in the “unsanctioned demonstration” have been ordered to pay a total of about 10,000 AZM (over 80,000 USD) in fines.²¹

Freedom of the press is in a dire state as well. All Azerbaijani TV channels are directly or indirectly controlled by the regime and independent newspapers and journalists face immense difficulties. Restrictions exist in

¹⁸ International Crisis Group. 2010. “Azerbaijan: Vulnerable Stability,” *ICG Europe Report* 207.

¹⁹ Farid Guliyev. 2013. “Oil and regime stability in Azerbaijan,” *Democratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 21:1, 113-147.

²⁰ Briedé, “Azerbaijan: is the...”

²¹ Human Rights Watch. 2013. Azerbaijan: Unnecessary Police Force at Peaceful Protests, at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/03/12/azerbaijan-unnecessary-police-force-peaceful-protests>, accessed August 20, 2013.

the legal sphere, making it hard to obtain the permits and funding needed for work as well as in the shape of more informal pressure. More and more often, critical journalists are threatened, physically assaulted, arrested on various charges or kidnapped.²² Facing heavy fines for “defamation” as well as severe limitations in printing and distribution opportunities, the two major opposition newspapers, *Yeni Musavat* and *Azadliq*, are now on the verge of bankruptcy.²³ With freedom of assembly restricted and independent media marginalized, the internet is, in a sense, the only space left for political activism. The January 2013 events illustrated how during recent years it has become increasingly popular among democracy activists in Azerbaijan to use online channels such as Facebook, blogging and tweeting for spreading information and organizing activities. This being said, the government is becoming increasingly aware of the rising Internet activism and is trying to find ways to restrict its impact (see Pearce and Hadjizade and Pearce, this issue). As the government is closing more and more doors for online and offline activism by legal regulations and physical assaults, it still remains to be seen how repression will influence the growing mobilization in the long run. According to Pearce and Kendzior, increased repression has successfully dissuaded many Internet users from political activism in Azerbaijan.²⁴ For some however the clampdown would appear to have had the opposite effect. One blogger testifies to this unexpected outcome, referring to the controversial 2009 arrests of democracy activists/bloggers Emin Milli and Adnan Hadjizade. Charged with “hooliganism,” the bloggers claimed their arrests were politically motivated and their incarceration provoked world-wide protests.²⁵

When Emin and Adnan were arrested in July 2009, it was also a start to a whole new page of my life – the one when I had to pick a side and stick to it. I did not, and have never, regretted it ... On Facebook, where most of our activity was concentrated, many unfriended or hid me. Losing some of them was pretty painful, but the cause was worth it. Especially, given that it introduced me to a whole new dimension – the world of activism.²⁶

²² Rashid Hajili. 2012. “Freedom of Media in Azerbaijan.” In Adam Hug, ed., *Spotlight on Azerbaijan*, London: The Foreign Policy Centre.

²³ Reporters Without Borders. 2013. Opposition Daily Throttled Financially by Lawsuits and Dirty Tricks, November 22, at <http://en.rsf.org/azerbaijan-opposition-daily-throttled-22-11-2013,45504.html>, accessed December 1, 2013.

²⁴ Katy E. Pearce and Sarah Kendzior. 2012. “Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan.” *Journal of Communication* 62:2, pp. 1-16.

²⁵ International Crisis Group, “Azerbaijan Vulnerable...”

²⁶ Fatalin’s Blog, 2011. *Fighting Windmills? Go on, 17.2.2011*, at <http://fatalin.wordpress.com>, accessed August 20, 2013.

However, with the exception of the early 2013 protest events, there have been few attempts to translate the online dissent to “offline” action to capture those supporters of the opposition who are “not on Facebook.” As for now, the major force of activism is limited to a small elite group, as few Azerbaijanis are online.²⁷ At the same time, the rebellion in Ismayili and the (so far unsuccessful) attempts to start similar demonstrations in other cities show that discontent with the political situation does exist outside of Baku. To find methods of mobilizing the rest of the population who rely on state television for information is a major challenge for the democratic opposition. One step on the way was the “National Council of Democratic Forces” – an election coalition uniting both the “new” and “old” opposition behind a candidate to challenge President Aliyev in the October 2013 presidential elections.

A Presidential Election and Hope for the Future

The fact that 2013 was an election year most probably also contributed to the upswing in mobilization. Due to the harsh government restrictions on political rallying, the election process, during which international observers ensure the opposition’s right to campaign, is traditionally the opposition parties’ only chance to interact with the public.²⁸ In preparation for the 2013 presidential election in Azerbaijan, 129 persons signed the Declaration of the National Council of Democratic Forces in Azerbaijan. Among these were leaders of traditional opposition parties, academics, representatives of civil society, youth activists, as well as religious figures. After some initial problems the Council united behind one presidential candidate, Jamil Hasanli, a renowned Cold War historian at the Academy of Sciences. If elected Hasanli would have been an interim president for two years, during which time the Council would have established a parliamentary republic.²⁹ Hasanli’s welcome from the opposition community was lukewarm at first, as many considered him too unknown outside the academic community. As the campaign progressed, however, it appeared that Hasanli managed to prove himself a dignified and worthy candidate. His active engagement with the “Facebook generation” seems to have paid off. Also his brave stance and open critique of the Aliyev family’s misrule during the chaotic, to say the least, televised presidential debates impressed many. If nothing else, these debates showed with a depressing

²⁷ Katy E. Pearce. 2012. “Information and Communication Technology in Azerbaijan”. In Adam Hug, ed, *Spotlight on Azerbaijan*. London: The Foreign Policy Centre.

²⁸ Arif Yunusov. 2010. “The Impact of Arab Revolts on Azerbaijan’s Political Scene,” *Eastern Partnership Community*, at <http://www.easternpartnership.org/publication/politics/2011-04-27/impact-arab-revolts-azerbaijan-s-political-scene>, accessed August 20, 2013.

²⁹ Shaun Walker. 2013. Director vs Dictator, *The Independent*, July 15, at <http://etiraz.com/the-independent-director-vs-dictator>, accessed August 19, 2013.

clarity that Aliyev and Hasanli were the only “real” contestants. The other eight candidates spent the majority of their airtime giving Hasanli a hard time or defending the incumbent from the “vicious attacks” of the outspoken opposition candidate, as he was not present to do this himself. As in previous years, Ilham Aliyev did not feel the need to conduct any election campaign, but communicated that his actions for the people should speak for themselves.³⁰ The opposition, in contrast, desperately needed to get its message out and, given the difficult conditions, the National Council ran a respectable campaign. Having failed to win permits for gatherings in central locations, they held a number of sanctioned election rallies in the outskirts of Baku, gathering some 1,500-3,000 participants. Rallies were also conducted in other cities, often with interference from the local police despite being legally organized.

Nevertheless, as many observers pointed out, the opposition never stood a chance of winning the election.³¹ After amending the constitution in 2009 to eliminate the two-term limit for the presidency, Ilham Aliyev could stand as a candidate for a third term. Nobody was surprised when he won a landslide victory, scoring 85 percent of the votes versus a mere 5,5 percent for the opposition’s candidate, according to the official tally. Beyond the restrictions on the political and civil liberties that have severely impacted the existence and activities of the opposition, the issue of election fraud is also a major problem. As noted above, with the possible exception of the 1992 presidential election, no free and fair election has been held in Azerbaijan since independence. Electoral fraud, in varying degrees, has become the norm. In a study of the 2008 presidential election and 2009 referendum, Herron has noted that the order to ensure certain election results probably does not come directly from the top. Instead, he writes, Azerbaijan “... represents a case of uncoordinated interference by officials, in which orders are not explicitly provided through a chain of command but more subtle signals are used to impel officials to deliver the vote adequately.³² Still, if anything, the 2013 election was marked by more and dirtier foul play than previous elections. The day before the

³⁰ APA News Service, September 6, 2013, at http://en.apa.az/xeber_ali_ahmadov_there_is_no_need_for_ilham_198957.html accessed January 13 2014.

³¹ See for example: Thomas De Waahl. 2013. What lies ahead for Azerbaijan? Carnegie Endowment October 7, at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/10/07/what-lies-ahead-for-azerbaijan/gpd3> accessed December 1 2013 or Farid Guliyev & Katy Pearce. 2013. The Challenges of Electoral Competition in an Oil Rich State: Azerbaijani Pre-Election Report. *Monkey Cage*, October 6 at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2013/10/06/the-challenges-of-electoral-competition-in-an-oil-rich-state-azerbaijani-pre-election-report/> accessed December 1, 2013.

³² Erik S. Herron. 2011. “Measuring Dissent in Electoral Authoritarian Societies: Lessons From Azerbaijan’s 2008 Presidential Election and 2009 Referendum,” *Comparative Political Studies* 44: 11, 1-27.

election, Meydan TV, an independent television channel broadcasting via satellite and the Internet from Germany, broke the news that an application for mobile phones launched by the Central Election Commission (to allow users to follow the election results) already showed that Aliyev was the winner with 72.76 percent of the votes. The results were quickly removed and the official response was that they were part of a test, but the damage was done.³³ The scandal, referred to as “Appgate,” set the tone for an election that the OSCE/ODIHR’s monitoring mission, in an unusually critical statement, said had “serious flaws.” Stuffing ballot boxes, so-called “carousel voting,” when a group of people vote in numerous polling stations, problems with the ballot count, threats, and even physical attacks on independent observers were just some of the violations documented.³⁴

One can only speculate that it was the opposition’s mobilization, its consolidation in the National Council, the election campaign, and the popular protests in the spring that made the authorities feel compelled to ensure the incumbent president’s victory in this devastating way. Perhaps, as suggested by Herron, the order did not come from above, but the electoral fraud could instead be a way for others further down the hierarchy to show their support for the system. The question is, however, what actually was accomplished through this obvious fraud, as it fed into the image of Azerbaijan as an undemocratic state, both inside and outside the country. The fact that the violations could be more easily exposed than previously, thanks to photos and videos on mobile cameras, and spread via social media made it painfully clear to people in general, as well as those already working for change, that the election process was merely an illusion. The OSCE/ODHIR’s election monitors were so critical in their analysis of the election that they, unlike in previous years, refused to sign the statement presented by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) and the European Parliament (EP) in which they, among other things, shamelessly stated that “overall around election day we have observed a free, fair and transparent electoral process.”³⁵ Instead, OSCE/ODIHR published its own statement, in which it, for example, noted violations in the counting procedure in a shocking 58 percent of polling stations visited.³⁶ Even

³³ Rebecca Vincent. 2013. Azerbaijan’s ‘Appgate’. *Al Jazeera* October 14, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/10/azerbaijan-appgate-2013101314326460795.html>, accessed December 1, 2013.

³⁴ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR). 2013. “International Election Observation Mission, Republic of Azerbaijan - Presidential Elections October 9 2013. Preliminary Statement of Findings and Conclusions,” at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/106901>, accessed December 1, 2013.

³⁵ PACE News. 2013. “Presidential election in Azerbaijan: joint statement by PACE and EP delegations. 10 October,” at <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=4699&lang=2&cat=31>, accessed December 1, 2013.

³⁶ <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/103589>

though the opposition lost the election, it still sees this development as something positive. These widely differing statements from actors who all, in theory, should represent “European norms and values” have attracted international attention and led to intensified debate on the international community’s double standards towards the Azerbaijani regime.³⁷

It is difficult at this stage to assess the impact of the National Council of Democratic Forces and whether it will be more successful and enduring than previous election coalitions, such as Azadliq in the 2005 parliamentary elections. Certain opposition groups, most noticeably the Republican Alternative (ReAL) movement, that is perceived by many as a serious initiative with future potential, chose not to enter the coalition. Nonetheless, as ReAL’s presidential candidate, Ilgar Mammadov (presently in prison accused of instigating the Ismayili riots), was rejected by the Central Election Commission on claims that some of the signatures he submitted were forged, he urged his potential voters to support Hasanli. It was always clear, however, that this cooperation with the council was temporary. In light of the election defeat, some members have also decided to leave the coalition. Most notably so far, one of the key partners, the Musavat Party, withdrew their 12 representatives in January 2014.

Even though the unity of the opposition at the moment is shaky, this merging of “old” and “new” opposition figures, with religious activists added to the mix as well, is nevertheless interesting. It shows that despite a “static” political situation, the opposition in Azerbaijan is showing signs of dynamism. As further discussed in Sultanova’s chapter in this issue, there is an ongoing debate as to what shape the fight for political change in the country should take. At the same time, as the young people in Azerbaijan seem to have lost faith in traditional opposition parties, the coalition during the election indicated that the generational shift in the democratic movement might possibly in time be formalized on the political arena. Combined with greater international attention to the deteriorating human, political and civil rights situation in Azerbaijan, this might be just the revitalization that the Azerbaijani democratic movement needs to survive and prosper.

³⁷ European Stability Initiative. 2013. “Disgraced. Azerbaijan and the End of Election Monitoring as we know it.” November 5, at http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_document_id_145.pdf accessed December 1, 2013.